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Book Review: *Keeping the Nation's House*

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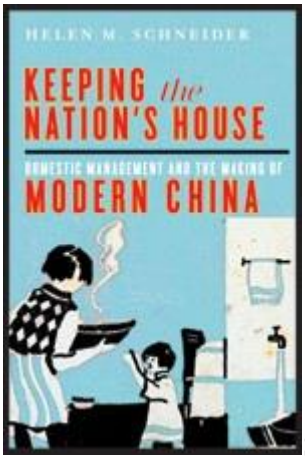


Schneider, Helen M. *Keeping the Nation's House: Domestic Management and the Making of Modern China*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. xii, 321 pp. $94.00 (cloth); 34.95 (paper)

By Elizabeth LaCouture

In 1940, China's Nationalist Ministry of Education issued a decree from its wartime capital of Chongqing. At a time when Japan occupied China's eastern seaboard and the Communists controlled the north, the Ministry called on educators and homemakers to "cultivate children's happiness." Doing more with less, teachers and mothers were supposed to make children believe that "even if the food is unsatisfactory, the clothes are inadequate, or the habitation is insufficient… it is still very good" (p. 1). In Keeping the Nation's House, Helen Schneider explores how Chinese educators and the Chinese state transformed the seemingly frivolous and individualistic bourgeois concept of domestic happiness into a political ideology that promised to save the Chinese nation. Schneider's methodically researched monograph charts the rise and fall (and rise again) of home economics in twentieth-century China, arguing that home economics became an academic discipline when it introduced new modern and political meanings into the Chinese home. Using women's magazines, educational debates, and home economics curricula as evidence, Schneider suggests that happy homes in Republican-era China were hygienic, healthful, efficient, and above all, the cornerstone of national salvation.

As Schneider notes, the idea that the household was central to political authority was nothing new in China. During the late imperial period, Neo-Confucian socio-political ideals connected household to state through an ideology of "inner" and "outer," in which the health of a household ("inner") helped determine the political stability of the state ("outer"), and vice versa. Recently, Susan Glosser (2003) has argued that family continued to be central to both Republican and early Communist political ideology. Schneider builds on Glosser's arguments about ideology by factoring in the materiality of home economics, explaining how educational practices transformed discursive ideas of a happy home into concrete plans to re-engineer Chinese society.

Through illuminating sources and captivating anecdotes, Schneider reveals the twists and turns that led Chinese people to focus on "keeping the nation's house," suggesting that the rise of domestic science as a force for national salvation was not a foregone conclusion. The story begins in the late Qing, when self-strengtheners called for educated women to take the lead in raising the next generation of Chinese citizens. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War, these early reformers turned to Japanese models of female education, particularly the "good wife and wise mother." Educational reformers of the early Republic uniformly advocated for schools to educate girls and women outside the home, but they lacked consensus on what that education should look like, and on how female education could best reform Chinese society. Should education enhance women's natural talents, or *tianzhi*, as housekeepers, caretakers, and mothers? Or should women receive the same education as men, training them to enter society in a variety of careers?

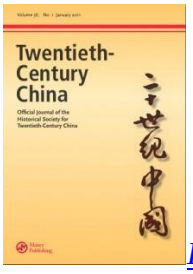
In the 1920s and '30s, home economics educators forged a compromise by developing a curriculum that transformed the "natural" female talents of domestic nurturing and management into new public careers for women in education, nutrition, and health. "Keeping the nation's house" no longer simply meant asking women to *modernize* their own homes to serve the state, but instead meant calling upon women to pursue professional careers that could *reform* the nation's house at all levels of Chinese society. Infusing social reform into domesticity, home economics thus emerged as a formal academic discipline in the 1920s. Schneider suggests that this social turn in domestic education was due in part to an epistemological shift in female education away from Japan and toward the United States. The American Christian-founded Yenching University, for example, established the first long-running department of home economics in 1924, and like their colleagues in the social sciences, home economists at Yenching promoted social scientific education as a vehicle for enacting social change in China. But it took the crisis of war to transform the home from a site of social reform to the center of national salvation. In wartime, the Guomindang state asserted the power to mobilize all levels of society, right down to individuals and homes, leveraging patriotic nationalism to demand that female citizens serve the state by helping their families deal with wartime scarcity. Indeed, Schneider posits that the academic discipline of home economics had become so intertwined with Guomindang political authority that once the Communists came to power, they swiftly disbanded all home economics departments—even as they continued to employ home economics professionals in education, public health, and early childhood development.

The breadth of Schneider's research opens the door for further studies on female education, female careers, domesticity, and housing in Chinese, East Asian, and world history. Schneider has combed local and national archives in Beijing, Chongqing, Hunan, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, revealing how extensively home economics stretched across China. Yet at times her sources seem in tension with this evidence. For example, Schneider cites the 1919 observations of Ida Belle Lewis, an American authority on Chinese education, suggesting that domestic science played only a minor role in Chinese girls' schooling, and notes that as late as 1932, only 10% of female students at Hebei Provincial Women's Normal College majored in home economics (pp. 83, 127). Thus, further studies might examine the extent to which this new discipline actually filtered into Chinese homes. And while the global history of home economics is beyond the scope of Schneider's research, she offers tantalizing examples of the ways in which Chinese home economics education played out on regional and global stages: China not only

translated knowledge from Japan, Europe, and the United States but also introduced curricular innovations at the same time as the United States.

By illuminating how politics built the nation's house and how home shaped national politics, Schneider effectively demonstrates that home economics education meant much more than lessons in swaddling plastic dolls. But perhaps her greatest contribution lies beyond politics—in the histories of the individual women we encounter inside the nation's house. In listening to the voices of girls who took home economics courses to save their country and professional women who toiled at keeping the nation's house long after their academic discipline had become politically incorrect, Schneider shows us that while intellectuals and government elites may have been the architects, Chinese women built the nation's house themselves.

Glosser, Susan L. *Chinese Visions of Family and State: 1915—1953*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.



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